

Developing an Idaho-Based Marketing Cooperative for Sustainably and Locally Grown Produce

Janie Burns (Farmer/Rancher Grant Program)

Project Number: FW95-046

Title: Developing an Idaho-Based Marketing Cooperative for Sustainably and Locally Grown Produce

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Janie Burns with her organically raised turkeys at Meadowlark Farm in Nampa.

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Situation:

While consumer demand for sustainably grown local produce is building, the infrastructure to support this demand, especially in the areas of marketing and distribution, is lacking.

Restaurants, hospitals and other institutions prefer to work with larger distributors, as opposed to individual farmers, to assure a constant supply.

The help producers link with these important markets, a grower cooperative was seen as a possible venue.

Objectives:

- Assess farmer interest in forming a cooperative for sustainably grown produce in Idaho
- Assess restaurant and other institutional interest in buying from a grower cooperative
- Explore the logistics of setting up a cooperative, and if feasible, take steps to set one up



Actions:

Grower Assessment

The project team identified growers of fresh produce (certified organic and conventional) within a 200-mile radius of Boise. Eighty growers who market in the Boise and Twin Falls areas were identified.

Twenty-two growers completed a three-page survey, extracted from a sample producer questionnaire (Appendix I, USDA Cooperative Information Report No. 7, "How to Start a Cooperative").

Buyer Assessment

A list of Boise restaurants, excluding national chains, was reviewed by a project steering committee to identify those most likely to be interested in buying organic and/or locally grown produce.

Surveys were completed by 22 restaurants, four grocery stores, two produce suppliers and three "other" (cafeteria, hospital and school).

Grower Decision

Following survey analysis, a day-long grower workshop was held in Boise, attended by 17 growers, to discuss survey results and consider forming a cooperative. Two operating organic cooperatives were invited to discuss their operations:

- Georgia Grown Organic, a small-scale, low-volume cooperative
- Tuscarora Organic, a larger Pennsylvania cooperative serving 26 growers

Marketing Trial

Five growers participated in an eight-week trial to sell vegetables to a local restaurant, matching produce available to restaurant needs.

Results:

The surveys revealed a strong interest among growers in forming a cooperative and among buyers in buying locally grown organic produce.

Based on survey results, the marketing trial and information from the visiting cooperatives on successes and challenges, the growers attending the workshop decided to form a cooperative based on the Georgia model.

A steering committee met to formalize bylaws and create the cooperative, Idaho Organics Cooperative Inc., with a board of directors, articles of incorporation, bylaws and a financial structure.

Potential Benefits:

While the cooperative achieved a healthy launch, it met with several challenges, including reduced restaurant purchases after 9/11, and no longer operates.

The experience provided valuable information:

- More education is needed about sustainable agriculture
- Conventional farmers will only adopt sustainable and organic practices when they see neighbors succeeding, an economic advantage or both
- Budget enough time and money to bring the cooperative to fruition
- Institutional buyers, often with large food service companies contracts, may need to be approached on a personal level to open doors for the purchase of local produce



Janie Burns

20% by 2020

Janie Burns, operator of Meadowlark Farm in Nampa and a local and sustainable food advocate, has been actively participating in the Treasure Valley Food Coalition's program to encourage more Idahoans to eat Idaho-grown food.

Situation:

Only 2% of what is grown in Idaho is consumed in Idaho. That means most food consumed in Idaho is produced elsewhere. With the soil, climate and water to grow a variety of healthy food, Idaho can do better.

Objective:

Increase the amount of Idaho-grown food consumed by Idahoans to 20% in 2020 from 2% in 2010



"The Healthy Dozen" comprises 12 Idaho-grown products.

Actions:

2010: Promote an understanding of food and the farm economy, based on a study by Ken Meter of Crossroads Resource Center. Included many presentations about the local food system.

2011: The Year of Idaho Food, a year-long celebration to raise awareness of food. Partnered with Urban Land Institute and University of Idaho to create a baseline of current production and consumption.

2012: The Idaho Healthy Dozen, a focus on 12 locally grown foods chosen to help in understanding agriculture and the food system. 1) beverage milk, 2) wheat flour, 3) beef, 4) dry beans, 5) carrots, 6) peppers, 7) tomatoes, 8) potatoes, 9) leafy greens, 10) apples, 11) strawberries, 12) grapes.

2013: The Tomato Independence Project. Americans eat an average of 90 pounds of tomatoes a year, so the goal is to encourage people to grow and eat local, fresh tomatoes in 2013.

For more, go to <http://treasurevalleyfoodcoalition.org>